

# Limbu language

**Limbu** (Limbu: འྷེཾཾཾ, *yakthung pān*) is a Sino-Tibetan language spoken by the Limbu people of eastern Nepal and India (particularly Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Sikkim, Assam and Nagaland) as well as expatriate communities in Bhutan, Burma, Thailand, the United Kingdom, Hong Kong, Canada and the US. The Limbu refer to themselves as *Yakthung* and their language as *Yakthungpan*. Yakthungpan has four main dialects: Phedape, Chhathare, Tambarkhole and Panthare dialects.<sup>[4]</sup>

Among four dialects and/or many dialects, the Phedape dialect is widely spoken and well understood by most Yakthungpan speakers. However, as there are some dominant Panthare scholars who have role to create knowledge and control knowledge in the Limbu communities, Panthare dialect is being popularised as a "standard" Limbu language. As Panthare Yakthungs are much more engaged in central political position and administrative positions, they are trying to introduce Panthare dialect as a Standard Yakthungpan.

Yakthungpan (Limbu language) is one of the major languages spoken and written in Nepal, Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Sikkim, Bhutan, Burma, and Thailand. Today, linguists have reached the conclusion that Yakthungpan resembles Tibetan and Lepcha.

Before the introduction of the Sirijanga script among Limbu Kirats, the Róng script was popular in east Nepal, especially in the early Maurong state. The Sirijanga script had almost disappeared for 800 years and it was brought back into use by Te-ongsi Sirijunga Xin Thebe of Tellok Sinam Limbuwan present day Nepal. The Limbu script is called 'Sirijanga' after the Limbu culture- hero Te-ongsi Sirijunga Xin Thebe, who is credited with its invention.<sup>[5]</sup>

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| Limbu                                      |   |
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| འྷེཾཾཾ, <i>yakthung pān</i> <sup>[1]</sup> |   |
| Native to                                  | Sikkim and Eastern Nepal  |
| Region                                     | Nepal; significant communities in Bhutan; Sikkim and Darjeeling district of India   |
| Ethnicity                                  | Limbu people  |
| Native speakers                            | 380,000 (2011 census) <sup>[2]</sup>  |
| Language family                            | <div>Sino-Tibetan<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Himalayish languages<span> </span>?<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Mahakiranti<span> </span>?<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Kiranti<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><b>Limbu</b></li></ul></li></ul></li></ul></li></ul></div> |
| Dialects                                   | Phedape, Chhathare, Tambarkhole & Panthare  |
| Writing system                             | Limbu script  |
| Language codes                             |   |
| ISO 639-3                                  | lif   |
| Glottolog                                  | limb1266 ( <span>http://glottolog.org/resource/language/id/limb1266</span> ) <sup>[3]</sup>   |

## Geographical distribution

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Limbu is spoken east of the Arun River in the following districts of Nepal (*Ethnologue*).

- Province No. 1
  - Dhankuta District
  - Ilam District
  - Jhapa District
  - Morang District
  - Panchthar District
  - Sankhuwasabha District
  - Sunsari District
  - Taplejung District
  - Terhathum District

## Dialects

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The Limbu languages are divided into four dialects :<sup>[6]</sup>

- Phedappe
- Pachthare
- Chathare
- Taplejunge or Tamarkhole

*Ethnologue* lists the following dialects of Limbu.

- Dialect cluster 1
  - Panthare
  - Chaubise (Charkhole)
  - Yanggroke (Yanggruppe)
- Dialect cluster 2
  - Phedappe
  - Tamorkhole (Taplejunge)
- Dialect cluster 3
  - Chhatthare (Chatthare, Chhathar)

Yanggroke, Chaubise, and Charkhole are minor variants of the Panthare dialect. Phedappe and Tamorkhole are similar. Chathare is less well understood by other dialect speakers. The Limbu dialect spoken in Sikkim, India is the same as Panthare.

## Sirijanga script

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Limbu language is one of the few Sino-Tibetan languages of the central Himalayas with their own scripts.<sup>[7]</sup> The Limbu script or Sirijanga script was devised during the period of Buddhist expansion in Sikkim in the early 18th century when Limbuwan still constituted part of Sikkimese territory.<sup>[8]</sup> The Limbu script was probably designed roughly at the same time as the Lepcha script (during the reign of the third King of Sikkim, Phyag-dor

Nam-gyal (ca. 1700-1717)). However, it is widely believed that the Limbu script (Sirijanga) had been designed by the King Sirijanga in the 9th century. The Sirijanga script was later redesigned and re-introduced by Te-ongsi Sirijunga Xin Thebe . As Te-ongsi Sirijunga Xin Thebe spent most of his time in the development of Yakthungpan, Yatkhung culture, and Limbu script; he is considered as the reincarnation of the 9th century King Sirijanga.

As Te-ongsi Sirijunga Xin Thebe was astoundingly influential person to spread Limbu script, culture, and language, Tasang monks feared him. Tasang monks feared that Te-ongsi Sirijunga Xin Thebe might transform the social, cultural, and linguistic structure of Sikkim. Therefore, Tasang monks captured Sirijunga, bound him to a tree, and shot him to death with poisonous arrows.

Both Limbu and Lepcha were ostensibly devised with the intent of furthering the spread of Buddhism. However, Sirijanga was a Limbu Buddhist who had studied under Sikkimese high Lamas. Sirijanga was given the title 'the Dorje Lama of Yangrup'.

The language and script's influential structure are mixture of Tibetan and Devanagari. Unlike most other Brahmic scripts, it does not have separate independent vowel characters, instead of using a vowel carrier letter with the appropriate dependent vowel attached.

The Limbu language and literature have been less practiced in Nepal since the last eighteenth century. The cultural identity of any community was taken as a threat to the national unification by ruling elites until the recent years. The use of the Limbu alphabet was banned and the possession of Limbu writings outlawed. There were no specific laws about it, but the Security Act was enforced for such cases under the strong directives of Kathmandu.

## Writing

Limbu has its own unique writing system, which is similar to Tibetan and Sikkimese scripts. The Limbu script or Sirijunga script is unique and scientifically designed by King Sirijanga in the 9th century; it was later re-designed and popularized by Te-ongsi Sirijunga Xin Thebe and his followers in the 18th century. Since teaching of Limbu/Yakthung language and writing was banned by the Khas-Hindus in Nepal after the "Noon Pani Sandhi" between the Limbuwan and Gorkha Kingdom (Prithvi Narayan Shah), far more Limbus are literate in Nepali than in Limbu in Nepal. Although many Limbu books were written in Devanagari and Roman (English), now Limbus/Yakthungs have well developed computerized writing system and many books are published in Limbu script or Sirijunga script.

History of Kirat-Yakthung writing can be divided into the following ways:

1. Classical Kirat-Yakthung period: King Sirijanga (9th century AD)
2. The 18th century Kirat-Yakthunghang period: Te-ongsi Sirijunga Xin Thebe and his cronies movement
3. The 19th century Kirat-Yakthung writers and rhetors: Period of Jobhansing Limbu, Chyangresing Phedangba, Ranadwaj, and Jit Mohan (Brian Hudgson procured books and requested them to write histories, stories, narratives, culture, and so on)

| Letters        |         |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |
|----------------|---------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Limbu:         | ᱅       | ᱆     | ᱇     | ᱈     | ᱉     | ᱊     | ᱋     | ᱌     | ᱍ     | ᱎ     | ᱏ     |
| Transcription: | vowel   | ko    | kho   | go    | gho   | ngo   | co    | cho   | jo    | jho   | nyo   |
| IPA:           | carrier | /ka/  | /kʰa/ | /ga/  | /gʱa/ | /ŋa/  | /ca/  | /tʰa/ | /ja/  | /tʰa/ | /ɲa/  |
| Limbu:         | ᱐       | ᱑     | ᱒     | ᱓     | ᱔     | ᱕     | ᱖     | ᱗     | ᱘     | ᱙     | ᱚ     |
| Transcription: | to      | tho   | do    | dho   | no    | po    | pho   | bo    | bho   | mo    |       |
| IPA:           | /ta/    | /tʰa/ | /da/  | /dʱa/ | /na/  | /pa/  | /pʰa/ | /ba/  | /bʱa/ | /ma/  |       |
| Limbu:         | ᱛ       | ᱜ     | ᱝ     | ᱞ     | ᱟ     | ᱠ     | ᱡ     | ᱢ     | ᱣ     | ᱤ     | ᱥ     |
| Transcription: | yo      | ro    | lo    | wo    | sho   | so    | so    | ho    | loo   |       |       |
| IPA:           | /ya/    | /ra/  | /la/  | /wa/  | /ʃa/  | /sa/  | /sa/  | /ha/  | /lo/  |       |       |
| Diacritics     |         |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| Limbu:         | ᱦ       | ᱧ     | ᱨ     | ᱩ     | ᱪ     | ᱫ     | ᱬ     | ᱭ     | ᱮ     | ᱯ     | ᱰ     |
| Transcription: | ku      | ki    | ku    | kee   | kai   | koo   | kau   | ke    | ko    | kyo   | kro   |
| IPA:           | /ka/    | /ki/  | /ka/  | /ke/  | /kai/ | /ko/  | /kau/ | /ke/  | /ko/  | /kʰa/ | /kʰo/ |
| Limbu:         | ᱱ       | ᱲ     | ᱳ     | ᱴ     | ᱵ     | ᱶ     | ᱷ     | ᱸ     | ᱹ     | ᱺ     | ᱻ     |
| Transcription: | kak     | kang  | kō    | kat   | kon   | kop   | kom   | kor   | kai   | ko    | koo   |
| IPA:           | /ka/    | /kaŋ/ | /ko/  | /ka/  | /kon/ | /kop/ | /kom/ | /kor/ | /ka/  | /ko/  | /ko/  |

The Limbu script. Grey letters are obsolete.

4. The 20th Century Kirat-Yakthung writers and rhetors: i. After the establishment of "Yakthunghang Chumlung" (1925); thereafter, several books were published. ii. Limbu script was much more influenced by Devnagari script at this period. iii. At the same time, both national and international linguists, researchers, and writers addressed the issues in this period. This period is a period of inquiry, communication, discovery, and re/construction.

5. Late 20th and 21st century Kirat-Yakthung writers and rhetors: This period denotes after the restoration of democracy in Nepal in 1990. Introduction of "Anipan" at school; many research and writing such as MA/MPhil theses and research reports; establishment of Limbu organization at the local and global level; period of delinking, relinking, and linking epistemologies.

## Publications

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The Limbu language has many papers and publications in circulation. Tanchoppa (Morning Star), a monthly newspaper/magazine which has been published since 1995. There are many other literary publications. The oldest known Limbu writings were collected from the Darjeeling district in the 1850s. They are the ancestors of the modern Limbu script. The writings are now a part of a collection in the India Library in London.

## Teaching

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In Nepal, the Limbu language is taught on private initiative. The Government of Nepal has published "Ani Paan" text books in Limbu for Primary education from grades 1 to 12. Kirant Yakthung Chumlung teaches Limbu language and script in its own initiative.

In Sikkim, since late 1970s Limbu, in Limbu script has been offered in English medium schools as a vernacular language subject in areas populated by Limbus. Over 4000 students study Limbu for one hour daily taught by some 300 teachers. Course books are available in Limbu from grades 1 to 12.

## See also

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- History of Limbuwan
- Limbuwan Gorkha War
- Languages of Nepal

## References

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  4. A Grammar of Limbu By George van Driem 1987
  5. The Unicode Standard 5.0, Front Cover By Unicode Consortium, Addison-Wesley, 2007- Computers 1417 pages, Page 360
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  7. (Sprigg 1959: 590)
  8. (Sprigg 1959: 591-592 & MS: 1-4)
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## External links

- [Omniglot modern Limbu writing system](http://www.omniglot.com/writing/limbu.htm) (<http://www.omniglot.com/writing/limbu.htm>)
- [Limbu-English Dictionary of the Mewa Khola dialect](https://web.archive.org/web/20160531014159/http://lacito.vjf.cnrs.fr/pangloss/dico/) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20160531014159/http://lacito.vjf.cnrs.fr/pangloss/dico/>) (PDF introduction (<http://lacito.vjf.cnrs.fr/documents/public/L22lb.pdf>))
- [Kaipuleohone's LDTC collection includes open access recordings in Limbu](#)

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